



[Ruth First, 1925-1982](#)

Ruth First

Ruth First was a revolutionary leader, in her own right, of the Young Communist League of South Africa, of the Communist Party of South Africa before it was banned in 1950, of the Congress of Democrats, in all the campaigns of the 1950s, and in the clandestine South African Communist Party, before and after being forced into exile in the 1960s.

Ruth First was a lifelong militant of South Africa's liberation movement, and a martyr to its cause.

But also, Ruth First wrote seriously and profoundly about other countries than her own, and about the African countries in general from the point of view of a scholar, teacher and journalist.

Aquino de Bragança, the Director of the Centre of African Studies where Ruth First had been co-Director at the time she

was slain by the South African bomb, wrote after her death of “her personal struggle to unite political militancy and intellectual work”. It is clear that she excelled in both ways.

Revolutionary leaders need to be readers, and also to be writers. Ruth First’s work shows why.

Of the two attached and linked items, the chapter from Ruth First’s book “Black Gold” called “Workers or Peasants?” is the one that relates to Mozambique. Ruth First’s work in other countries was not unrelated to the South African struggle. This particular summary reveals in a way that becomes shocking, the awful effect of South Africa’s predatory relationship with Mozambique on that country as a whole, and on the migrant labourers and their families in particular.

Ruth First draws some conclusions, which might at this stage be challenged, concerning the co-operatisation of rural Mozambique as a component of socialism, or more broadly, of “development”.

It might be that a better course of action would have been to simply guarantee a market to the peasants, and then to let them organise themselves within that secure market environment, whether through co-operatives or in diverse other ways. In other words, there may have been more than the two ways to go that Ruth First describes in her concluding paragraphs. Read the piece to see what is meant here.

In the chapter, “The Limits of Nationalism”, from Ruth First’s book on Libya, what is described most clearly is the class dynamic of a state that rests upon the support of the petty bourgeoisie (or “petite bourgeoisie” as First tends to call it). This

is a class that typically expanded very quickly after the independence of African countries, First says. It is a class that wants to do everything according to its spontaneous, common-sense bourgeois lights. First describes how in Libya, previously existing organisations were disbanded, to be replaced by new ones created from the top down.

There are aspects of this very fine piece of writing that may apply to South Africa today, and which also to some extent explain both the strength and the weakness of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya of the late Muammar Gaddafi, still in evidence today after the intervention and bombing of Libya by NATO, the sword of the “international community” (i.e., of Imperialism).

Other books by Ruth First include **“South West Africa”**, 1963; **“117 Days”**, 1965; **“The Barrel of a Gun: political power in Africa and the coup d'état”**, 1970; **“Portugal's Wars in Africa”**, 1971; **“The South African Connection”**, 1972 (with Jonathan Steele and Christabel Gurney); and **“Olive Schreiner”**, 1980 (with Ann Scott). Earlier, Ruth First had worked for the Guardian/New Age newspaper, under the editorship of Brian Bunting.

Ruth First's own archive of her work is available for viewing on microfilm at the Historical Papers Archive, located in the William Cullen Library at Wits University, Johannesburg. The web site of this public institution is at <http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/>.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-texts: [Ruth First, Workers or Peasants? 1983](#), and [Ruth First, Libya - the Elusive Revolution, 1974](#).
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